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ABSTRACT

The Ad Hoc Working Group on Special Needs of the Literacy Workers' Alliance of Manitoba met monthly from September 1991 to January 1992 to discuss ways of meeting the special needs of adult literacy program participants who have been identified as having learning difficulties, specific needs due to mental or physical disability, or psychological/emotional conditions. The group formulated 10 recommendations: literacy programs should be encouraged to enroll a select number of special needs students; they should develop their own guidelines for integrating special needs students; they should be discouraged from having a majority of special needs students; they should receive extra support to maintain special needs students in their programs; personnel should be available to provide educational consulting to local agencies; programs should consider how long they will be able to accommodate any special needs student; special needs students should have the opportunity to explore other educational experiences; and programs should work closely with other community providers to provide special needs students with job training experiences that will potentially lead to real jobs. The group further recommended that literacy workers receive extra training opportunities to help them cope with special needs students in their programs and that referral agencies make appropriate referrals to programs. (A list of working group members is appended.) (MN)

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ACCESS AND THE SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENT

LOOKING AT LITERACY PROVISION

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Introduction

Literacy programs are increasingly asked to meet a wide range of learning needs. Students enroling in literacy programs may have literacy levels from beginner to GED preparation. Out of this range of learning needs, some students are identified as having learning difficulties, specific needs due to mental or physical disabilities, psychological or emotional conditions, or specific learning disabilities. Some literacy practitioners have become concerned about meeting these specific learning needs in their students. These practitioners formed the core of the Ad Hoc Working Group. (See Appendix A for list of members)

The Ad Hoc Working Group on Special Needs met monthly from September 1991 to January 1992. Through discussions, sharing and some brief training experiences, we became aware of the issues surrounding the integration of special needs students into mainstream literacy programming. We decided it might be helpful for literacy programs to have some general guidelines when considering the specific learning needs of some students. WE are therefore making specific recommendations that literacy programs might consider when addressing the integration of special needs students. We realize this document only begins the discussion about the range of ways literacy programming may be affected when integrating the special needs student.

We hope that this short report will be a discussion document that all literacy groups and programs can use as the basis for further program development. We encourage all literacy programs to share the recommendations with their students and Boards or Working Groups. The development of appropriate program guidelines regarding the special needs student may take time and need considerable thinking, talking and experimenting before everyone is satisfied.

Recommendation 1:

Literacy programs should be encouraged to enrol a select number of special needs students.

Students with special needs can learn and do learn just like all other literacy students. They may need specific supports or materials, but all literacy programs should be encouraged to have at least some special needs students within their programs.

Recommendation 2:

Each literacy program should make its own guidelines for integration of special needs students.

Each literacy program has different access to resources. Some programs have more funds, more volunteers, more community involvement than others. Some programs hire instructors with special education background. The AD Hoc Working Group recognizes that each program will be able to integrate special needs students after consideration of these factors.

Recommendation 3:

Literacy programs should be discouraged from having a majority of special need students.

Mentally challenged students and students with specific learning disabilities will have special learning needs. The aim of these students is to be 'integrated' into mainstream society. If most of the students in the literacy program are those with special needs then the program is no longer a 'mainstream' program. The wider the spectrum of learners in a program, the healthier the program will be. If too many special needs students make up the student population, the program will no longer seen to be representative of the community. Literacy programs will need to be careful about the intake of special needs students to make sure that a fair balance is maintained.

Recommendation 4:

Literacy workers should receive extra training opportunities if they are to cope with special needs students in their programs.

Literacy working groups and employers of literacy workers must support training initiatives for their instructors. Many literacy workers are trained to teach mainstream learners but do not have the wide range of strategies and approaches needed to instruct students with mental or psychological handicaps. Literacy workers may need additional training in instructional techniques and materials from a qualified source.

Recommendation 5:

Literacy program should receive extra support in the maintenance of special needs students in their programs.

The Literacy Project developed through the Association of Community Living Manitoba has demonstrated the usefulness of on-going support for literacy workers and special needs students. The continued interaction between the learning specialist and the learner and tutor/instructor has been extremely valuable. If programs are to successfully integrate special needs students, this specialist support should continue.

Recommendation 6:

Referral agencies must made appropriate referrals.

In tough economic times and in the social decisions which are currently operating in our society, many more mentally challenged physically disabled and psychiatrically treated people are 'on the streets' than ever before. In attempts to give many of these people some community support and experience referral agencies may try to place students in literacy programs who do not belong there.

Each program should establish guidelines for student entry so that agencies are clear about referrals. Agencies need to collaborate with literacy programs to ensure that appropriate placements are made. Regular personal contacts and clear publicity should help eliminate potential confusion from social and other agencies. Agencies must also realize that just because a student is in a literacy program does not mean that <u>all</u> his or her needs can or will be met.

Recommendation 7:

Literacy programs should make personnel available to provide educational consulting to local agencies.

Literacy practitioners are in the best position to advise local community groups and referring agencies about the learning needs which can and cannot be met through the local program. These agencies should be able to contract directly with the literacy program to provide on-site training for their staff. Fees for this service could be negotiated by either the literacy program or the instructor providing the training. Staff of counselling and day centres may be particularly interested in this service.

Recommendation 8:

Literacy programs should consider how long they will be able to accommodate any special needs student in the program.

It is recognized that many special needs students will have limited literacy gains within a two or three year span. Obviously these students might continue to benefit from being in programs for many years. However, space may be quite precious in some programs that have waiting lists. Therefore, each program will need to decided how long it will keep students with special needs in their program.

Recommendation 9:

Part of the literacy program for special need students should be exploring options for other educational experiences.

If a special needs student has a limited time in the literacy program, then that student will need to discover a range of community options for when s/he leaves the program. These options might include volunteer work in the community, job preparation and job search techniques, learning new skills which prepare the students for recreational activities such as crafts, home making, or woodworking.

Recommendation 10:

Literacy programs should work closely with other community providers to enable special needs students to receive job training experiences that will potentially lead to real jobs.

Special needs students should receive work experience training. However that training should prepare them for jobs **they are likely to get.** It is unfair to both students and programs to create unrealistic expectations. For example, we should not prepare students for jobs that require such qualifications as a high school diploma if the students' abilities are quite limited. In these times of economic hardship, many special needs students will have limited access to employment opportunities. The Ad Hoc Working Group realizes this is a major issue for many literacy programs.

APPENDIX A:

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